The Sins of Sor Juana

Research Requirements

**Production History**

In 1999, The Sins of Sor Juana by Karen Zacarais premiered at the San Diego Playhouse in San Diego, California.

Karen Zacarias is **the** founder and artistic director of Young Playwrights' Theater, an award-winning company that has worked with students in Washington, D.C-area schools since 1995 to enhance literacy, spark creativity and resolve conflicts through playwriting. Zacarias's play Mariela in **the** Desert, a winner of **the** National Latino Playwrighting Award and a finalist for several other prizes, debuted at Chicago's Goodman Theatre this past February, and her new musical comedy for children, Einstein Is a Dummy (written with composer Deborah Wicks La Puma), just premiered in an extended run at Atlanta's Alliance Theatre. **The** **Sins** of **Sor** **Juana**, winner of **the** Charles MacArthur Award for outstanding new play at D.C.'s 2000 Helen Hayes Awards, has been widely produced, and Zacarias is translating it for a Spanish-language production in April at D.C.'s GALA Hispanic Theatre. Her other plays for young people include Ferdinand **the** Bull and Cinderella Eats Rice and Beans: A Salsa Musical. Zacarias earned her B.A. from Stanford University and a master's degree in playwriting from Boston University, studying with Nobel laureates Derek Walcott and Elie Wiesel. We conducted this conversation by e-mail.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

CARIDAD SVICH: "Beware of **the** big idea" is something I often tell students when I teach playwriting, "because **the** burden of **the** big idea can stop you from writing **the** real play at hand." Many terrific plays come at their large questions through almost imperceptible means (Chekhov is exemplary at this). Your play **The** **Sins** of **Sor** **Juana** focuses on **the** personal and political trials of 17th-century Mexican nun, poet and pre-feminist icon **Sor** **Juana** Ines de la Cruz--it tackles **the** question of **the** necessity of artistic freedom sometimes head-on and sometimes more deceptively. It's a wonderfully sneaky play! How did you wrestle with bringing her to theatrical life? As artistic freedoms are curtailed in many countries around **the** world, what do you think **Sor** **Juana**'s story can teach us?

KAREN ZACARIAS: I started writing **Sor** **Juana** with **the** grandiose idea that I was introducing this noble character to a new audience that "needed" to know who she was. Two minutes later (and for **the** full next four months), I was completely blocked. Plays about icons are insufferable to write and even worse to sit through; plays about people, however--now those can be interesting.

I did a crazy amount of research on "Sister Jane" and then decided to throw away everything I knew about her--I had to figure out why I personally wanted to write about this woman who was doomed to be silenced. Then suddenly I realized that **Sor** **Juana**'s story was very parallel to my grandmother's life story--she was **the** true brilliant writer in **the** family, difficult and charismatic and contradictory, who was silenced in so many ways, and died in her room alone, just like **Sor** **Juana**. But unlike **Sor** **Juana**, my grandmother was far from being a nun--she was an early feminist who fell madly in love with **the** wrong man. She struggled with her conflicting feelings for my traditional grandfather and her need for expression in a world that did not deem her worthy. And so my play strayed from being a biography into a creative study of **Sor** **Juana**'s life through **the** angle of writing, love, compromise and betrayal. It became a play about societal obstacles to expression, but also a study of how all of us bargain and negotiate away certain freedoms and artistic choices for uncertain comforts and societal acceptance. I'm afraid these 17th-century themes are still relevant today.

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More Details About *The Sins of Sor Juana*



**Josephine Louis Theater**

**More Information**

<p>In his new role as artistic director of the Theatre and Interpretation Center (TIC) at Northwestern University, Henry Godinez will direct Karen Zacarías’ compelling drama about a 17th century poet-nun and her quest for artistic freedom and social equality as the third production of the TIC 2008-09 mainstage season.   
</p> <p>“Sor Juana is an amazing character because her struggles are the struggles of all human beings who are ahead of their time and who are compelled to express themselves in societies and environments that will not embrace them,” said Godinez. “Even if she were alive today, she would have faced challenges.  She was a revolutionary individual who refused to be contained by any religious or social boundaries because her need to explore went beyond any framework that existed.  She was fiercely independent and endlessly curious, to the point where she just did not fit in that time and place.” </p> <p>An icon to people in Central and South America for the cultural significance of her writing, Sor (Sister) Juana Inez de la Cruz, was born in Mexico in 1648. She was one of the first published poets of the Americas, a member of a Mexican convent and also is known for her plays and letters. The folklore that surrounds her life – including rumors of a man, of a failed love – also enshrouds her death, as it is believed that she died at the age of 40 as a result of the Church’s demand for her silence and her vow to never write again.   
</p> <p>“The Church was opposed to Sor Juana because she was a nun writing works that expressed a female’s sensuality,” said Godinez. “She was a firm believer that women should be educated, which was very rare in 17th century Mexico. Since she was a champion of education for women, it threatened the system. Mexico and Spain were not female-oriented societies at that time. The Church felt that her writing was erotic and indecent. It was expected that if you were in the Church, you would only be writing to praise God. This is a passionate and inspirational play by a celebrated female author with great roles for female actors. I’m very excited that my first time directing on the TIC mainstage represents an opportunity to share with our audiences and students the story of a woman who is so significant in Latin American history and culture, yet known to very few outside of Latin America.”</p> <p>The framework of the Winter 2009 stage production combines historical facts with some fiction. Playwright Zaracías used her imagination as to what might have happened to personalize Sor Juana and show her humanity and feelings of being trapped in a society that did not value a woman’s right to an education. The two-act play will feature a 12-member cast of Northwestern undergraduate students.    
</p> <p>All of the stage sets and most of the costumes have been designed and constructed on the University’s Evanston campus. Lighting will create mood and atmosphere and serve to focus on specific areas on stage. One stunning set will be dominated by a span of three rows of columns to create the sense and perspective of a church. </p> <p>The lush, but austere black and white court costumes were inspired by the artwork of the great Spanish painter Diego Velásquez (1599 to 1660), while the majority of nun’s simple habits are white and also historically correct for the period.   
</p> <p>The Baroque Mass and Gregorian chants influenced the background music composed specifically for the production by Argentinean composer and Loyola University head of music composition Gustavo Leone. Godinez and Leone met at Columbia College, where they both once taught. Leone’s music is his interpretation of the dynamics and spirit of Zaracías’ play. It sets the tone, period and atmosphere of the play and is used for transitions and for underscoring the dialogue. </p>

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By [Jennifer Vanasco](http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/ArticleArchives?author=867577)

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One of Latin America's best-known poets is 17th-century nun Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz. A court favorite in Mexico, she was ordered to stop writing by the Catholic church after she sent a private letter to a bishop expounding on women's right to an education. Karen Zacarias in The Sins of Sor Juana, directed by Edward F. Torres for Teatro Vista, uses snappy, anachronistic modern language to make the nun sharp and real. This ambitious, almost Shakespearean work shows how fierce unmet needs can lead to tragedy in a restrictive society. Sandra Marquez plays Sor Juana as a woman of strong intellect who's overcome by passion, and Juan F. Villa offers a finely textured portrait of the (likely fictional) man who seduces her in order to betray her, only to find himself in love. Through 11/21: Tue-Thu 7 PM, Fri 11 AM and 7 PM, Sat-Sun 7 PM. Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, 1852 W. 19th, 312-738-1503. $15-$18.

Zacarias wants Sor Juana to live, to jump at us from history and show us that there is still a connection. Zacarias instructs in the script’s *Notes from the Author*, “The level of pagentry and forms of magic should be taliored to the creativity, capabiltiy and needs of each produciton” (Zacarias)